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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000005

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN COURT RENDERS SURPRISE LIGHT SENTENCE IN
DISSIDENT TRIAL

REF: DAMASCUS 0002

Classified By: CDA Todd Holmstrom for reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (SBU) Summary. In a surprise move, the Damascus Criminal Court handed down a relatively light sentence against prominent dissident Fa,ik al-Meir on December 31. Al-Meir, who was facing capital charges, could be released as early as next month. The decision appeared to catch most human rights observers in Syria by surprise. Nearly all of them, however, suspected the sentence may be connected to Syria's recent dealings with western powers, including the U.S. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On December 31, the Damascus Criminal Court convicted and sentenced to 18 months Fa,ik al-Meir, a member of the secretariat of Riad al-Turk,s People,s Democratic Party,

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for expressing condolences by telephone to Elias Atallah of Lebanon,s March 14 Movement after the November 21, 2006 assassination of Pierre Gemayel. However, with time served plus a stipulation in Syrian law which makes convicted criminals eligible to have a quarter of their sentences cancelled, al-Meir could be out of prison as early as next month.

¶3. (SBU) Al-Meir was initially detained on December 13, 2006 in Lattakia. On January 23, 2007, the state charged al-Meir with &conspiring with a foreign country to attack Syria.⁸ More specifically, al-Meir was charged with contacting the Lebanon March 14 movement, which the court labeled pro-&American and Zionist.⁸ Ultimately, however, al-Meir was only convicted for the crime of &weakening the national feeling during a time of war.⁸

¶4. (C) One reason the case has dragged on nearly 13 months is that defense lawyers appealed to the Syrian Supreme Court for two of the associate judges to be removed from the case. In mid-December, the Supreme Court refused the petition and defense lawyers decided not to press the issue further because they felt international developments were conducive for a favorable verdict, according to defense lawyer Khalil Matook.

¶5. (C)The light sentence was clearly unexpected by many of the human rights observers and civil society activists, who were noticeably pleased. According to Damascus Declaration member Fawaz al-Tello, the regime decided for a lighter

sentence because it is trying to build better relations with western powers in order to improve its regional position. Defense lawyer Hicham Noufal speculated that the moderate sentence may be connected to the recently concluded U.S. Congressional visit (reftel). On the other hand, defense lawyer Sirin Khoury opined that the relative leniency reflected the regime's sense that it was no longer threatened by internal opponents, the most active of whom are now in prison or otherwise silenced. Damascus Declaration leader Riad Seif, though clearly pleased, remarked that the verdict was &half of a catastrophe,⁸ meaning that a man was still sentenced to 18 months for making a phone call.

¶6. (C) Al-Meir himself appeared to be pleasantly surprised by the verdict. He previously spent ten years in prison until being released in 1999. In addition to al-Meir's wife, other noteworthy dissidents at the trial were Riad Seif and fellow Damascus Declaration notables Riad al-Turk and Hassan Abdul-Azim, who is also leader of the Nasserite Arab Socialist Union. Also in attendance were diplomats from the Swedish embassy.

¶7. (C) Comment: One relatively lenient sentence does not make a trend) especially against the backdrop of a nearly two-year-long crackdown on all regime opposition. Yet, the timing of the verdict is potentially notable, coming on the heels of President Asad's still-unfulfilled commitment to CODEL Specter to release seven opposition activists detained for their association with the newly created National Council. We doubt al-Meir's sentence signals a change in SARG treatment of human rights/opposition activists but international public scrutiny of Syria's human rights record seems to have put the regime on the defensive.

HOLMSTROM